S6E02: A Theologian Confronts the Doctrine of Discovery and Calls for Institutional Repair

Fri, Jan 16, 2026 12:43AM • 1:01:34

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Doctrine of Discovery, white supremacy, anti-racism work, Christian supremacy, Fordham University, Jesuit institutions, land grants, Haudenosaunee, Onondaga Nation, Christian theology, institutional reparations, intercultural relationships, religious diversity, historical injustices, land justice.

SPEAKERS

Jordan Loewen-Colon, Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Sandy Bigtree, Speaker 1, Philip P. Arnold

Jordan Loewen-Colon 00:06
Matt, hello and welcome to the mapping the Doctrine of Discovery podcast. The producers of this podcast would like to acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, Fire Keepers of the Haudenosaunee, the indigenous peoples on whose ancestral lands Syracuse University now stands and now introducing your hosts, Phil Arnold and Sandy big tree,

Philip P. Arnold 00:31
welcome back to mapping the Doctrine of Discovery. My name is Phil Arnold. I'm Professor in religion and core faculty in Native American studies at Syracuse University, and the founding director of the scano great law Peace Center here in Onondaga Nation territory.

Sandy Bigtree 00:49
And I'm Sandy big tree. I'm a citizen of the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne. I'm on the planning board of the Scannell great law

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 00:59
I am so happy to be joining you. This is Janine Hill Fletcher. I am a professor of theology at Fordham University in the Bronx, New York City, and I'm looking forward to the conversation.

Philip P. Arnold 01:14
Well, it's great to have you with us, Janine, it's your work has been very well respected among people we know and who we work with. I'd like to start with a question, just a general question of how you got into this work of issues around race and religion, white supremacy and religion, and can you just give our, you know, just a little more a kind of thicker description of your of your background, sure.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 01:47
So I was trained as a Catholic theologian looking at the diversity of religions, so that's kind of my primary entry into the theological field. Is, how have Christian theologians spoken about diverse religious communities and diverse religious beliefs. And so my early work really focused on what is called the theology of religions. How do Christians fit the reality of religious diversity into their own Christian theological framework? But when I arrived at Fordham University, I got connected with our community engaged learning program, our service learning program. It was called, at the time, connecting folks at the university with the work of justice, of nonprofits, of organizing outside the gates

of our institution, outside the gates of our university, out in the Bronx Community. And my mentor at the time really said we can't do the work of justice without recognizing that Fordham University is a predominantly white institution. It's been white serving for most of its history, and some might say even today, it bears that that that stamp of white interests and as a Catholic institution, it bears the stamp of Catholic identity and some patterns of of Christian supremacy. But her insight was we can't do the work of justice without doing anti racism work. And as a white theologian trained at Harvard Divinity School and arriving and teaching at a at a well respected Catholic institution, it was never part of my responsibility to learn the language of racism, anti racism, and my my role within it. So in doing that work, really came to recognize anti racism work as an important component of justice work. But then I came back to my theological training, and I said, Oh, but we're not, you know, these theologians down through the centuries. They weren't talking about race. They were talking about religion. They were talking about religious difference. It's too bad in my in my mind at the time, it's too bad that I can't do the anti racism work based on my training as a theologian interested in religious diversity, until I used an anti racism frame to look at these texts that I had been working with that in the modern era, it's not just Catholic and Christian theologians, European heritage theologians talking about the religious difference of others. It's a racialized project, and that's really what got me into kind of thinking about my own role as a theologian, as a white theologian at a predominantly white institution. To what extent does our work as theologians, even if we want to be doing the work of justice, to what extent do we have to learn? Look at our own inter not only our internal biases, and the internal bias of Christian supremacy runs pretty strongly through Christian and Catholic theology. Yeah, yes, I do, and so and so, I think it was that work, you know, around I'd say probably from maybe 2012 onward, the work that I was doing here at the university that was really pushing me as a white theologian, right? We're in the in the in the Catholic traditions that I have been shaped in. We are very strong in our commitment to justice, but we are also fairly blinded to our own participation in racial injustice. And I think, I think the same is true for other forms of injustice, if Catholic theology and Catholic theologians and white heritage, European heritage, white theologians are concerned about justice in the world. Can we do that without really reckoning with the ways that we have inherited benefits from these forms of dehumanization and exclusion and injustice? Wow.

Philip P. Arnold 06:20
What you're describing is a real sea change for yourself, you know, coming out of, you know, the divinity school there, and then, you know, realizing that you had to make really, a sharp turn being, well, it's a Jesuit institution. So that's part of this. That's part of that, that heritage, you know, justice, or at least seeking justice, you know, yeah, so, how do you so, yeah, I'm wondering about the institution, and the the willingness, I guess, of the institution, given where You are of or and your department in the institution. How does that? How does that factor into your continuing work?

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 07:09
I guess, yeah, yeah. Well, there's two dimensions of that. There's the dimension of what, what went into the earlier book with the sin of white supremacy in 2017 and then I'll talk, I'm happy to talk a little bit more about the current work, the work that was published in 2017 I think, was part of a movement at the institution to really take seriously the histories of white supremacy. What's really interesting about the book is it came out in 2017 and just before 2017 there was this sense of a movement in white institutions that we really needed to take seriously, the movements for racial justice in our in our nation. And 2017 if folks kind of can mark the histories here, 2017 was the demonstration in Charlottesville, and the sense in which Christian nationalism and white supremacist ideology were now taking a more a more public facing stage. And I remember when we were, you know, developing the title of the book, I said, Well, nobody really it's a little bit bold to name white supremacy, like, you know, people say, Oh, well, you'll see that. If you see the cover of the book right now, it's plain white. When I went to when I when the book was in production and the title was the sin of white supremacy, the Art Department working on the book, said, well, well, here's the KKK, right? How about that for the cover? Well, well,

here's a burning cross on someone's lawn. I said, Well, that's not really the type of white supremacy I'm talking about, right? It's structures and systems, and it's subtle, and it's something that we swim in and all of that. But since 2017 I think that the my looking back on the anti racism work on campus, which was which was affirmed, there were a lot of people across the university who were doing the work of anti racism workshops and really trying to create collaborations and really trying to reckon With our own role as a white institution. So the work from 2017 on, you know, we had, we had an anti racism plan put in place by the university, right? And then we updated it a few years later with the murder of George Floyd, right? And so between 2017 and 2020 and then into covid, I think that we were as an institution, really saying, Yeah, we're ready to reckon with this. And so the the reception of the book at the institution was, was I had colleagues who who read it, and, you know, brought people together, and we talked about it. And I. And, and I think that the work of that, of that of the first book, is really kind of relearning a history that had been erased within white Catholic circles, right, a history of Christian deep involvement with the injustice of white supremacy, right? And so the way in which the book was was received, people were ready to reckon with that history, right? And it was a history that's, that's the book kind of does a history that's out there in the nation, right? And I go, okay, so how were these ideologies of Christian supremacy? How were they out there in a variety of places within the US? How did they make their way into legislation? How were theologians involved in constructing that way of seeing the world? And really kind of tried to write a story, a fairly broad us story, about how this kind of this, this pattern of thought, right, came to be one in which white Christians, even those who wanted to be involved in justice, were not seeing this white supremacy woven through our history. And so I think that that has been I think it's been received. It was received. Well, I did a lot of workshops with different organizations, kind of saying, Okay, let's know this history. Let's work with this history. The more recent book was another form of kind of soul searching. And you know, not just what is this history, but what does this history have to do with me? The most recent book really says, Okay, this reality of white supremacy, yes, it's out there in our nation, but it's also in here, in our institutions. And so the attempt with the latest book is to say I am a member of very specific institutions. How have the Jesuits, which is a the Jesuit institution? How have the Jesuits been part of this, these structures and systems of white supremacy in our education system, in what we've passed down in our in our theologies, how has Fordham University, in a particular way, been part of the structures and systems and practices of white supremacy. And so the the the most recent book, really asks us to know our institutional histories as well as our national history. And I'll say it's a little too early to know what the reception on that book is.

Philip P. Arnold 12:41
Yeah, I'll say, because I couldn't get it in advance of this interview, but I did get my library to buy it so, but I should, I should mention the title, grace of of the ghosts, theology of institutional reparation. Yeah, I look forward to to getting my hands on it. So, you know, I mean, there are other Jesuit institutions I'm thinking of, you know, particularly Georgetown, and, you know, other institutions that are kind of involved in what you're describing, in many ways here in Onondaga Nation territory, that's the central fire of the the hood nashoni. We have Lemoine college, you know, named after father Lemoine, who supposedly contacted, you know, the the Onondaga in 1652, something like that. But, but and Sandy and I were, involved. This is kind of just a description of another story you know, to do what, what you want, what you wish. But Sandy and I were, were involved in, in developing the scanner, great law Peace Center, which told the story of the Haudenosaunee, the founding of the Haudenosaunee and then early contact with Jesuits in 1656,

Sandy Bigtree 14:06
right, right. I I'm from Syracuse. I'm Mohawk, but I grew up in the city just a a few miles north of the ondaga nation. And I grew up learning about the French fort, as everybody did in this area, and it was established in 1656, when the Jesuits arrived here. The narrative at the center at that time was that the Onondaga begged the Jesuits to please come and Christianize us, and the Jesuits arrived indeed with a deed, indeed with a deed to 600 square miles of land, and their first contact moving into this area.

And so it was a failed mission. They were here for less than 20 months, and yet, this area, I don't know the state, was involved in the history. Oracle. Center of this area was involved in commemorating this, this event that happened in the 17th Century by building a replica in 1933 right during the rise of fascism, and fascism was really strong. I don't think people are aware how strong, especially in this city, upstate New York. And actually, the first German boom the central office was in Buffalo, New York, and that was a partner of Hitler's who, when Hitler went to prison after the first failed coup, his partner came to the Americas and landed in Buffalo. Wow. So there's a strong connection, you know, to religion and what was going on here with the Catholic front. At that time, the Christian front, there was a broadcast priest was promoting this narrative of white supremacy in my my estimation, right? And they were very much connected in various offices and Boston and New York City with Nazis. So they were very much connected as well as in this city after this fort went up in 1933 to a great celebration in this area. The Columbus statue went up the following year, and it was paid in part by Bellini insurrection coming up shipment when they built that fort in 1933 it was 200 years off the mark. It was actually a 19th century replica, not a 17th Century because they wanted to promote the cowboy and Indian theme that people a tourist could identify with. So we're right in the thick of this propaganda. Originated with the Jesuits, by the way, and so we've we've been involved in repurposing that propaganda that was shared with this whole area, right in the heart of on dog and nation territory, and we repurposed it into an educational center to teach people about the great binding piece That was formed at Onondaga Lake and created the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. So we've been, you know, involved in that, and it's been contentious. At the beginning, it's far less contentious, but we still have to deal with that, given the climate where we are, because everyone's been educated through propaganda about this history, and even when the British came here, they were they had already come here. The knowledge they had was taken from the Jesuit relations in Europe. They were just building on what they had learned from the Jesuits.

Philip P. Arnold 18:02
So, I mean, this is one of the one of our, one of our questions, big questions for you is because the you know, this group of Jesuits in 1560, 1656, came with the deed even previous to their even arriving to the lands. I mean, this goes back to certain papal bulls in the 15th century which were which were working on re translating that. That basically said, when the when Christian explorers enter the lands of non Christians, those lands, their bodies and all their worldly possessions are essentially the possession of the the church and the sponsoring monarch. So this was the, you know, the engine that that drove, say, the theological engine that drove. And then what's really insidious, of course, is that this becomes the basis, basis for US property law in 1823, so, so, so we're wondering, I mean, this, you know this, this Jesuit Land Grant was essentially an example of the doctrine of discovery. And I'm wondering the degree to which that is connected to your work or not. I mean, it seems like it resonates with what you're trying to accomplish, but it's anyway I just like for you to talk about that.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 19:28
Yeah, there's a number of directions that my thoughts are going with this new information that I really had not even thought about the Jesuits as a presence in in in your part of New York, yeah, and the 1656, and the land grant and the deed that's assigned in your in your geographical area, there's an intimate connection. There must be. With the Jesuits who are assigned with to the land grants in Maryland at the same time, 1634 so so Fordham University kind of traces its history through the Jesuits coming from a variety of locations. So there were Jesuits who came through Maryland in 1634 another set of Jesuits who then were French Jesuits who may be connected with the Jesuits who were who were in your area in in 1656 and it's really kind of a confluence of these Jesuit trajectories that arrive in New York City in 1846, and and that that the part of what the work that we're doing right now, my colleague and I on Fordham's history is we're trying to situate Fordham's history within a network of Jesuits, Right so, so the fact that I had not connected the Jesuits who were arriving in another part of the of this of the land roughly the same timeframe, right in the 17th century. And what we've been

focusing on with the with the history in Maryland has been the history of Jesuit and enslaving, and the way in which slavery was the was the engine that built up the Jesuit institutions. But it is simultaneous with the land grants that were assigned to Christians, as you're describing, right? There's a Christian hegemony and a Christian supremacy that's built into that and and and taking ownership of that injustice, taking ownership of that that that stolen land, but, but you know, of course, you know, that with the doctrine of discovery and the and that that theological engine came along the you know, kind of the broad expanse of Christendom, right? This sense that Christianity isn't just about about belief, but it's also about claiming the whole of the globe under the banner of Christ. And so this Christendom mentality that really is the horizon of the land grab and the you know, and the legal, the legal white supremacy of the doctrine of discovery as it then unfolds, is is bound up with white supremacies that that that take the resources from indigenous people. And it's bound up with the white supremacies that take the resources from enslaved peoples. And so this history in 1634, in your you know, in your place and the history of the same history, but in another geographical location, those things are connected. And I don't think that we as as scholars of this network of Jesuit institutions have really yet done the work of saying we're responsible not so. Part of what happened when the when the 2016 when the stories of the history of Georgetown's involvement with enslaving and selling 272 human beings to keep Georgetown afloat. Part of what happened in that era was the Jesuit institutions kind of said, Yeah, we have to look at our history, but at least we're not Georgetown right? At least we did not do that right. And I think that part of my part of the project is to say what was going on in in your your geographical space, and what was going on in my geographical space. Those were not disconnected projects, even though we want to distance ourselves from them, right? Well, that's not my institution. So that that I mean that you've given me another you've given me another direction to go with my research. Because we I've been kind of the book that I that the most recent book, starts at Georgetown right as the location of kind of the an initial set of injustices rooted in white Christian supremacy. But they could simultaneously be talking about the Jesuit relations and the indigenous peoples and the Jesuit institutions and practices, yeah, and so the the fact of the land grant, right? The fact of the land grant that can be traced back to, you know, the, I think it's, I think it is in Johnson versus Macintosh, where you, where you where you. You read in, you know, the 1823 document, which says, look, the Doctrine of Discovery without that name, the protocol of all of these Christian nations was this, this is what, this is what they did for, for several 100 years. And so the doc, the, you know, the founding documents, like the documents from the Catholic Church. In 1493, those founding documents become protocol, right? And then by 1656, and 1634 it's like, well, yes, we're giving this land. We whoever this we right? We're giving this land to the those who can bring five Well, in the Maryland context, those who can bring five men with them to civilize, you know, to to create the new nation, or the new colony, colony, yeah, yeah, right, the new colony in in 1634, and of course, you know, one point of analysis is that the Jesuits were bringing Five men who were not family members, right? They were, they were, you know, that. And so the property stays within the institution, right, within those networks. And so there really is a direct, you know, it's a concentrated set of stolen resources that do get passed down and to us even

Sandy Bigtree 26:24
today, and it's fabulous. It's also instilling the patriarchy, because if you look at those first encounters, we were matrilineal, our matrilineal societies, and they targeted the women right instantaneously, and they tortured women, and they wrote about them as being the fire brands of hell, because we're based in a clan system that comes through. It's matrilineal through the the women, and it's a very tight system, our loyani, or what have been called, erroneously called chiefs, because it's not a hierarchy, but our loyani are chosen by the women. The women can remove them from office. They came in here and they they took away our clan names, and they gave us Christian names. They reorganized the family under the patriarchy with a surname, and forced the women to marry their husbands in a church service and take a valid subservience to their husband. So we're talking about a grand scale of domination, like laying that out from the ground up when they set foot on this right.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 27:35
And I think that, I think that the difficult work of putting those multiple sets of domination into the frame at the same time right to really kind of recognize that this is a pattern of domination that is Christian supremacy, but there's a male supremacy that runs through it as well, and to and to own that set of of organizing right, that organizing frame that that has been passed down through the Catholic tradition and and and really to see those places of resistance to those patterns as as being, as you know, the the invitation to put those into closer conversation, right? And and with the with the matrilineal and with the patterns of domination, one of the things that I do when I'm teaching the Doctrine of Discovery is to start with that. You know that historical moment in, let's say 1493 but then we can bring it up to the 1600s but then that pattern of Catholic missionizing and Christendom continues into the era of Indian boarding schools. And one of the you know, just it's, it's heartbreaking, right, to see this pattern over several 100 years, and it's even more heartbreaking to read the accounts of the Jesuits right, and thinking about the boarding school practice as another attempt to Christianize, to civilize, right? All of that, and to get intimately into their writing. And in one writing, I was especially struck by the boarding school practice of one of the one of the Jesuits writing about it and saying, what we really need to do is, is bring these young people away from the influence of their grandmothers. Right, that the strong influence, the strong alternate vision, right, that the grandmothers were passing down. And yet, in the in the accounts of survivors of Indian boarding schools from the 20th century, you hear them again and again saying it was the prayers instilled by my grandmother that that helped me to survive this. Right? And, right? And so this sense of, yeah, these are, these are deep rooted sets of practices, sets of theological construction, sets of ideologies that that become normalized right in, you know, in the in the long standing practice. And you know, Phil, back to one of the questions that you raised earlier, like, how is it received in a Jesuit institution? I think I have found a lot of companions in this work, among the Jesuits, right, who are really saying it's a spiritual practice to confess our sins. It's a spiritual practice to recognize our failures. It's a spiritual practice to be part of the project of repair. And so, you know, I think that that's where, that's where the work is. I think right now is, is looking at the history, but then also saying, not only do we need to know this history, but we need to keep on working toward repair of this history. And I have to say that one of the most profound experiences over the last two years was the conference at Syracuse, right because of the way in which you know, thinking about this as a white theologian from a predominantly white institution. But what does it look like to partner right with with so what does it look like to partner with indigenous communities and having been introduced to the work of land justice futures and the good work that they're doing with rematriating the land from the possession of Catholic women religious, and transferring it and working on that, that that project of reparations, in that way, I think that the parallel right with the Jesuit institutions, like, where are we repairing? Right? What does it look like to undertake the project of repair?

Jordan Loewen-Colon 32:09
Do you need help catching up on today's topic, or do you want to learn more about the resources mentioned? If so, please check our website, at podcast, dot doctrine of discovery.org, for more information. And if you like this episode, review it on Apple Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. And now back to the conversation. Excellent.

Philip P. Arnold 32:28
Yeah. I mean, you know one of the reasons I just mentioned to you that that your colleague, Christiana was up here along with Kim from San Francisco University, another Jesuit institution, and chip, our old friend chip Callahan, he's at Gonzaga Jesuit institutions. I think that you know that you could kind of develop this consortium. You know that are of people who are working really actively and in religion, on on, what does it mean to to repair these, these past traumas? Because I tell you, even in our family, these are intergenerational traumas that really just have not gone away. And I mean, it wouldn't be for the purpose of, say, enlarging the church. You know that because that, because that's also one of the reasons why people do these repudiations of the doctrine of discovery, and it's all but, but it could be

just for its own, you know, value in a way. You know, one of the things so we also have Lemoine college here, which is, we were in dialog with them quite a lot, you know, and some Jesuits there about the scanno Center and developing the scanner center. And one of the things that we were insisting on is that the Jesuit relations, whatever the primary texts are, they're not reliable, right? So how do we get back? We how do we get at this? We know something traumatic happened, even though you won't find it in the Jesuit relations, right? But there is a wampum belt, right? There is a wampum belt, which is a Haudenosaunee way of documenting history. So these kind of collaborations, so we have different stories side by side and and I think doing history that way, theology that way. I think, you know, that is inter, you know, interculturally. You know, you started off by talking about your work is inter religious, kind of, like relationships and and then, what does that look like? What does it look like to do that, you know, that work in. Culturally of repair, right? I wonder. There seems to be a lot there. There's certainly a lot of work. I'll say,

Sandy Bigtree 35:11
Well, this notion of repairing is kind of, you know, it's kind of a finished vision, right? The Haudenosaunee went through a transition where they were at war many 1000s of years ago. And that's why the the story of the great law and great binding piece is so important, because it shows a way through this disconnection and and warfare and distance, and what was involved in restoring all of this was reconnecting to the natural world and the relationships and identity being tied to the earth. So that's going to be a hard thing to incorporate into an ideological religion, right? That is not of this place. The Americas are unique because people immigrated into this country and left their homelands. So it's a very powerful scope here to have a better, healthy relationship with Native people, and to understand the land and our relationship to the land, because the land sustains us. We could not exist with the land. They are our caretakers. The land is, you know, it takes care of us, but it's, yeah, it's, it's very different. The two worlds cannot really come together because so adversely opposite, yeah, in so many ways, and healing. I mean, Haudenosaunee have no concept of guilt or sin or bad. All about relationships. Ceremonies are all about having gratitude for the natural world. We don't pray. It's so completely different.

Philip P. Arnold 37:12
But I mean it, but repair would have to be the commitment to listening and really connecting with one another's worldview, you know, a relationship and you know, so that's what we're trying to accomplish there at the scanner center. I don't know if you came to the scanner center, Janine,

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 37:33
I was not able to, yeah, I have not yet visited Well,

Philip P. Arnold 37:37
well, we'll just leave that invitation open for you to come next time upstate New York is a beautiful place,

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 37:45
it is beautiful. I still, I still remember the drive up and how, what a beautiful conference. The conference itself was beautiful, and the landscape arriving there was beautiful. It was really transformative for me.

Philip P. Arnold 37:59
Oh, that's great. That's Thank you. Yeah, and I so I hope that you can return and we can give you a proper tour of the scanner center and introduce you. One of the things we introduced chip Christiana and Kim to was the buffalo. That was an interesting they have a huge buffalo herd at Onondaga. Oh, wow. We went out on this little pickup truck with apples, and the buffalo love apples. And you know,

once you're in conversation with a buffalo, you know, things change a little bit. You know, your your your sense of the of the awe, or, you know, ultimate concern, I guess, is changing a little bit.

Sandy Bigtree 38:49
You can pet a cow, but you would never think to pet a buffalo.

Philip P. Arnold 38:53
No, no. Very different. So come up here where you can meet a buffalo. I did want to, so, you know, I did want to return to something because it's kind of a nerdy thing for me in religion, but I'm really fascinated with it, because what we have here is, you know, a shift so doctrine of discovery, and I'm wondering what you think of it, because, you know, the Doctrine of Discovery is, of course, this Catholic formulation, but it's even pre, you know, that's only, there's only the the Roman church that's operative at that time anyway, you know, in the 1500s but in the in the 18, it in the 19th century, when it becomes property law. You know, it's a Protestant nation building project, right? I mean, so I'm interested in how you think of how this appropriation of a kind of Catholic, Catholic formulation of colonization, right, morphing into this Protestant nation building project. Project. I mean, it's a, to me, it's, it's a kind of a, just a bit of a nerdy thing, you know, a religion nerdy thing. But I think there's a lot to that could be said about that. I mean, you know, obviously, you know, the founding fathers and, you know, Marshall, they all hated Catholics or distrusted the church, the institution, but at the same time, they're totally involved with adapting that formulation of colonialism into their own projects. You know,

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 40:35
I wonder if it's I don't know that I have, I haven't asked the question in the way that you're posing it, but, but there is a certain usefulness of kind of working our way backward to a foundational Christian supremacy and a foundational Christendom mentality and that and that, whether it's, you Know, a Catholic or a Protestant, that that sense of of missionizing, and the whole world is is called to be Christian, right, and that that's not just a, you know, a heart relationship. It's a political relationship. It's a it's a relationship, you know, that is a governing relationship. So I think that that, for me, the real knot, one among many of the real knots in doing this work as a theologian, is that the claims of Christian supremacy go way, way back, right, and and so some of my work is trying to think about how the earliest storytellers with that come to be identified with the Christian tradition. How do they have anti supremacy notions written into their way of telling the story of Jesus, but very early on, right? This sense of Christian supremacy. And then, you know, of course, into the fourth century with the creed that declares, you know Jesus as the centerpiece right of God's work in the world. And so the

Speaker 1 42:16
by the nice, yeah, right.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 42:19
So by the time you get to the 19th century, it's, it's, it's, you know, it's almost like, well, yes, of course, Christ is the center of everything, right? Yes, of course, that the mindset, the way that theology creates a mindset that then creates a world that white Christians lived into, is the logic of that is pretty consistent, right? So whether Christian, whether Catholic or Protestant, the Christendom mindset, the mindset of of missionizing and and the mindset of Christian supremacy, that's a pretty a pretty regular, a pretty regular pattern, right? And one that is is difficult to dismantle, but but also it's that intercultural, inter religious invitation to seeing that that the Christian heritage way of seeing the world isn't the only way of seeing the world. And I still use Tink Tinker's introduction to his American Indian liberation, where he, where he sketches out, pardon me, sketches out those deep cultural differences, right? The deep cultural differences of a white, European way of seeing the world that is geared towards

individualism and progress, right? And so I think that that recognizing that that logic isn't just Protestant or Catholic, but that it has these longer strands,

Philip P. Arnold 43:52
that's very helpful. That's really helpful. I was just showing Yeah, well, yeah, it goes way back, I guess. You know, because one of the things we're wondering in mapping the Doctrine of Discovery is where it starts, you know, and and, you know, it probably goes back to Constantine, at least, but you're pushing it back even further than that.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 44:14
So I think it, I think it depends on how you frame, what is the driving force of doctrine of discovery? Yeah, right. And if you frame that driving force as as Christian supremacy and Christ's singularity, then I think you can draw it way, way back. I think it's Stephen Patterson has a book called The earliest creed, and in that he kind of looks at the New Testament sources and says, identifies what, what he proposes, might have been the very earliest creed that that that kind of you. It has some anti supremacist elements of it, right? Neither, neither, well maybe, maybe not exactly, but neither, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, neither, neither Jew nor Greek. And yet what he points to is even that statement, right? That seems to be D hierarchicalizing. Then, you know, enacted was, was a was very quickly moved on from with hierarchical izing, different different sets of humans, right? And then, if you have Christ at the center of that, then the hierarchy of humanity is like, well, we have all these various hierarchies, but a really essential one is the hierarchy of Christian over over others. And I think you can trace that. I think you can trace that way, way back. That is Stephen Patterson's The Forgotten creed, Christianity's original struggle against bigotry, slavery and sexism. And I paused in the middle of my recollection of that text, because the end of that creed is also but all are one in Christ, right? And it's like, well, there's a there's a certain it's very difficult, right? For Christian theologians and for Christians to decenter their commitment to this to this Christian supremacy, but, but one of the things that Tink Tinker's work and others clearly have done is to recognize that even in Christian frameworks, there are ways of relativizing our claims with a bigger picture of a God that transcends any of our individual claims, right? Yeah, and so this, this opportunity to think about what opens up when, when Christians listen to, you know, the wisdom of relationship and the wisdom of relatedness to the natural world. I think, I think Tinker's work in a particular way. It's like, yeah, the European heritage, Christian way of approaching a relationship to the Earth is devastating for the earth, for humanity, for right, for who we are and and I think that that is when I when I can look at the patterns of thought that bring forth broken relationships in the Christian tradition. For me, my interpretation of the Christian tradition and others that I follow like the fundamental reality that sin is naming is a set of broken relationships, broken relationships with others, broken relationships with God, a broken relationship even with one's sense of self. And so by naming, you know, by really kind of foregrounding sin in some of the work I've done, I think that, I think that Christians can use that category in a way of really naming those things that break our humanity, that break our wholeness, that break us from one another. So I know there are others who wouldn't find that that particular category useful. But I also kind of narrate in the book that there's a there's for those who are not experiencing the dehumanization of these patterns of thought, rejecting sin right, and not being called accountable to those patterns of thought is quite convenient, right? Why would, why would, why would the claiming of other people's land be a sin? Right? If it brings, if it brings Christ and conversion and right and all of that. And I think that that's a long standing outlook, right? Is that, well, this was, you know, this was just part of the project that God had called

Philip P. Arnold 49:01
us to manifest destiny. Yes, yeah, right, yeah, right, yeah, no, I mean, and maybe we can kind of conclude, I mean, this might elicit more conversation. Of course, that's fine, but so we've been talking quite a lot about the past and, you know, and about what's how we've come to be here, but we are now,

by all accounts, you know, I was just listening to an interview with, you know, our friend Robbie Jones, who was at the conference, you know, and he was on Joy Reid, you know, Joy Reid was on MSNBC, and then was fired, and they were, they were on her show, talking about, on her podcast, about about, you know, where we are now. I mean, we are, by most accounts, now, a white Christian nation. Question, right? And that's how we got to where we are politically, you know, and, and I try to convince our my students, well, this is this didn't have happened, you know, like with Trump's first term or whatever, right? You know, you can, but it goes all the way back. We're talking millennia here. So, so how do you assess for your students? How do you assess how we got here in this, you know, with with our democratic principles, with our supposed separation of church and state, and all this yada yada yada, right, how did we come to be the white Christian nationalist nation that we that seems to be an ascendancy right now. Yeah.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 50:49
So the the framing notion that I have found helpful, and that I do incorporate into the new book is the notion of this as an ongoing struggle. So there are theorists who use the term agonistic, and I hadn't used that term before, but I found it useful to think about our lives as human beings, as part of this ongoing struggle for balance, or struggle for well being for ourselves, or struggle for well being for ourselves within community and with others and with the natural world. And I think that if you look at US history or the history of this of what becomes the United States, you see an ongoing struggle, both for white Christian dominance and against white Christian dominance. You see an ongoing opening of possibilities, right? The only way that you can, I'm sure you know this, and I think your our audience might know this as well, but the only way that you can name this land as a white Christian nation is by recognizing the elimination of religious diversity that has been a part of the project all the way through, right? And I don't have my, I don't have my my history in front of me. I'd have to flip through the pages to find but, but there was a point at which there was one treaty or congressional act, I think it was a treaty in which indigenous nations would have representation in Congress. It was a there was a vision at one point of of that being a possibility. And of course, that did not become reality, right? And it might not have been what indigenous nations wanted, but this, but this sense of the possibilities that were foreclosed, right? That the kinds of a Sean Crawley does some work thinking about otherwise possibilities within our histories, right, the possibility that we might have that that that the US might have learned and not just not just stolen the democratic principles, right, but learned the democratic Principles and lived in that, in that that vision of coexistence, right? But that, that opportunity was foreclosed, right? But then another opportunity opens up, and the possibilities of a multi religious nation, right? We see it all the way through us, history, these, these possibilities, right? But then the the return dominance of a white Christian narrative, or a white Christian nation, and so I think that we're living out our, our chapter, our episode, of this very long struggle. You know, when I started teaching 2020, years ago, students would come into my classroom and say, Oh yeah, yeah, slavery and, you know, the dispossession of indigenous people, that that was bad. But you know, we've come a long way, and we've had the civil rights movement and and here we are. Things are getting better, and I don't think my students think that anymore. I think that they really experience this as a moment of profound struggle in which white Christian supremacies appear to be again, bringing an enormous number of people In this land under its way. And I think that that is from a Christian perspective. I think that is sinful. I think that is a breaking of relationship with the Creator of all, yeah, so, so I don't know. I think, I think that it is, it is part of. Have a when you look back at US history, and you see the the immigration decisions, right, the legislation, when you see Jim Crow and the second class citizenship, when you see the the reservation system, right? These are, these are patterns that are, I are hauntingly still present.

Sandy Bigtree 55:25
Yeah, well, absolutely, and I have to, of course, interject, because the Haudenosaunee are sovereign, and they do not identify with being under the guardianship of the United States as every other tribal

government in Indian Country identifies, Onondaga, is the only nation in the country that still is organized by their pre colonial matrilineal clan system they did not abide by the puppet regimes the US forced everywhere else. The US took those poor children that were brainwashed in boarding schools and put those children in tribal office in through the BIA Bureau of Indian Affairs. So actually, in 1924 when the US bestowed citizenship on all Native people, it was representatives from the Haudenosaunee, the traditional representatives, that went to Washington and said, This could be interpreted an act of war, because if we are you, then our treaties are invalid.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher 56:41
And I, and I, and I think that that there's an there's a the possibility of witnessing the Onondaga Nation and the Haudenosaunee as an otherwise possibility. What would it have looked like, right, if all of the indigenous nations, right, had that sovereignty and maintain that sovereignty, what would it look like our relationship to the earth with that, with that form of caretaking, right? What?

Sandy Bigtree 57:07
Yeah, well, you know, I'm not saying in any way that there are no traditional people anywhere else in the country, because there are traditional voices everywhere. But they are not recognized by the United States, and they're in in the BIA is a tool of the United States. They make other kinds of agreements. They receive money from the United States. The Onondaga have never received money outside of the treaties with the United States, and they remain pretty poor, and they refuse to have casinos,

Philip P. Arnold 57:42
yeah, they stick to their their traditions. So it was, you know, it was an interesting project to try to collaborate with Onondaga. I mean, we've been at it for many

Sandy Bigtree 57:53
Oh, it's very difficult. And I, you know, are people up to really communicating with the traditional people that understand the land and still have these ceremonies, because they'll go right to BIA chiefs, and most of them are clueless about this stuff in this history. Frankly, I'm do hope it's changing, but you know, through my life experience, I've not seen it yet. Yeah, and screwing to really come face on with truly, an other way of being, yeah.

Philip P. Arnold 58:30
And I think, you know, ironically, you know, the Doctrine of Discovery conversations are difficult. They're, you know, they, they, you know, they kind of unravel a very genocidal past, you know, it's traumatic. It can be re traumatizing, as you were talking about, like the boarding schools and that sort of thing. We have a lot of native students at Syracuse and and sometimes that can be triggering, you know, for them. But on the other hand, I find that this conversation that we've been having about the Doctrine of Discovery, about about white supremacy, and I teach a class right now called religious dimensions of white supremacy, and I haven't been asked to change it, you know, in this current age of, you know, anti Dei, I don't know about you, you know, that was one of the things I was wondering about, if other institutions have caved, you know, but I haven't, you know, nobody asked, so I didn't, didn't change the title, but, but you know, in spite of that, I think it's helpful, it we can have these conversations around the traumas of the past, you know, around religion and you're a theologian. I mean, it's not easy to theologize, because, you know, cross culturally, or, you know, between, you know, racial communities and that sort of thing. But if you focus on. On the doctrine of discovery, and, as you say, repair, then it becomes it. It's a much more lively and focused kind of it's, it's oddly hopeful, is what I'm trying to get to. It's kind of oddly hopeful in a way that I had not expected,

Sandy Bigtree 1:00:22

but the land also has to have a seat at the table, and the water and the air always, always has to be part of the conversation, because that's affecting all of us, and that's our future together. Yeah.

Philip P. Arnold 1:00:37
Well, I want to thank you. Janine. Janine Hill Fletcher, your your work is inspiring. I hope, and I hope that it you move forward and that we have future interactions with one another, and certainly come and visit us in upstate New York. I look, I look

Sandy Bigtree 1:00:55
forward to it. Yeah, anytime, we'll take you to the center that you missed it.

Jordan Loewen-Colon 1:01:00
The producers, of this podcast were Adam DJ Brett and Jordan law and colon. Our intro and outro is social dancing music by Oris Edwards and Regis cook. This podcast is funded in collaboration with the Henry Luce Foundation, Syracuse University and Hendricks Chapel and the indigenous values initiative. If you like this episode, please check out our website and make sure to subscribe. You.